

Natural England (NE) - LAF Conference feedback 2017

Jo Hooper and Sue Pudduck (DCAF attendees)

Theme was 'making the case for access' but the focus was more on general access to the countryside rather than best practice/solutions for disabled people and other users. For example, the diversity group with lowest number of visits to the countryside are Black and Minority Ethnic people, however there was no sharing of information/discussion about how to overcome barriers for this group.

The conference was in Birmingham on the hottest day of the year!

Dogs:

Dogs should be seen as a catalyst for positive involvement in the outdoors.

Examples of good practice:

Kennel Club 'Let's Go Walkies' – a project of encouraging people with dogs to get out, and not to view dogs in the negative as is often the case.

Hampshire Council 'Planning for dog ownership in new developments'.

Dog Friendly Vale of Glamorgan.

Suggested to bring people with conflicting views together to discuss and make the case for access for dog walkers.

Natural England update:

This was a bit hard to follow due to jargon.

There was a brief outline of what is happening re statutory access. It is reviewed every 5 years and the next review is due 2019/21.

NNR (National Nature Reserves) Dedication Programme for new access for horse riders, cyclists and walkers. 64 new access rights on NNRs, 4 year programme. 21km of new routes, 252 ha for horses, 15,000 ha open access.

The England Coast Path will be finished in 2020 and be the longest coastal route in the world. 78% complete so far. NE currently working on 46 stretches and this will extend to all stretches by the end of June. Exmoor report to be published in June. Once completed it will also be reviewed periodically. A research programme has been set up to record the base line data and then will survey visitor activity and cost benefits to the locality.

In relation to the ECP, NE were not pro-active about disability access (in fact it was viewed as almost irrelevant) which was very disappointing and, I think, misunderstands what can be achieved. A disabled woman at the conference is trying to set up a disabled LAF members' network. This could be of interest to Gordon.

Recommendation: Devon LAF to send NE our Disability Access Position Statement, and to also ask them to promote it with other LAFs and consider it in relation to the ECP.

Health: benefits of access to the countryside and health explained – both mental and physical. Talked about 'social prescribing' e.g. encouraging access to green space as a GP 'prescription' for a health issue. Gave out some statistics which evidenced that lower social groups were far less likely to visit the natural environment. (See below).

It was agreed that engaging with the health sector was a challenge and suggested contacting the clinical commissioning groups for the area as more emphasis is being placed on alternative prescribing as a more cost effective way to address health inequalities.

Average visits per year - 65. Lowest Black and Minority Ethnic people and elderly at - 27. Disabled - 56. Low income - 50. Over 65s - 55.

Recommendation: Do we have strong links with the DCC Health and Wellbeing Board and DCC Scrutiny Committee? Perhaps we could arrange a joint meeting and have a look at strengthening links via membership as well as shared objectives/plans?

Evidence given of positive effects the natural environment has on dementia. Need to overcome barriers to improve access for people with dementia. This includes developing a 'dementia friendly green space directory'; places to sit, toilets, café, level ground and someone on site who is trained in dementia awareness. NE has commissioned research "Greening Dementia" This study shows that activities are a key motivator to encourage outside visits, e.g. bird watching, wild life, walking – so places to sit and look at things is good. Also important to involve carers in the design of programmes and outdoor spaces. NE do provide dementia awareness training.

Recommendation: Can we link with people working on Devon's dementia strategy? Can we pilot a space e.g. Stover Country Park that could become dementia friendly? Who could help set up the directory and deliver training to increase the number of dementia friendly green spaces? Could we help get funding to help deliver a 'dementia friendly green spaces' project in Devon?

DEFRA deregulation

The Deregulation Act came into effect in 2015 but guidance and regulations are yet to be produced.

Part of the reform package includes being able to appeal to the Secretary of State if a right to apply for diversion/extinguishment is turned down by the Local Authority.

All working towards the Definitive Map to actually be definitive by 2026.

Multi-use trails

Two speakers made the case for allowing cyclists and horse-riders to access more routes, although it was presented with very suspect use of statistics and with little discussion or advice about overcoming the issue of fear/perceptions and changing behaviour for respectful shared use. There was also a suggestion that the solution to making not only bridleways but also footpaths, cycle and horse friendly, was to go ahead and start using them and Cycling UK is pressing for legal changes to accommodate bikes and horses on footpaths. There was no information on what makes a route suitable for horse-riders – for example surface and width, or what criteria makes a route unsuitable (e.g. lots of bends, commuter cycle ‘rat-runs’ etc.?). Although the horse-rider presenting said that “there was no evidence of incidents/accidents” on current multi-use paths this was disputed by a participant. No statistics or data was given on multi-use routes, only statistics given on the number of deaths/accidents for horse-riders on roads.

The Camel Trail was cited as best practice. Apparently no conflicts or accidents. However it would be useful to know usage stats from Cornwall Council and why there have not been any incidents.

Someone pointed out that bridleways have always had shared access status anyway – learn from these.

Question also asked about meeting the needs of ‘adrenalin junkie’ cyclists who cause a lot of conflict on multi use paths, but no real solutions given. View of cycle person is that we shouldn’t judge the user by the minority who behave badly....we say this of other groups, so we should be challenging negative attitudes to cyclists, horse riders, dog walkers etc. However, it still didn’t do much to address problems that could arise between a speeding cyclist coming round a corner and meeting a horse-rider, or other concerns (whether perceived or real) such as fearful elderly, out of control dogs/horses and children etc.

Simple signage saying “Shared Use” or “Shared Use – Respect other users” was recommended but there doesn’t seem to be a standard and various ones have been seen.

Urban-access

Birmingham are trying to create more routes and asked us to draw lines for new PROW on a map! This workshop didn’t facilitate any discussion or share information on access issues in urban areas such as pavement parking. The maps gave no information about gradients or whether roads had pavements etc.

Railway Crossings –issues and solutions

Network Rail can close crossings instantly if they think there is a safety issue. The two people leading this session were both local authority employees who specialised in negotiating with Network Rail to find solutions other than closure. This can involve simple remedies like putting in a camera to for 9 days to record actual user numbers and behaviour as evidence, or cutting back undergrowth that obscured view of lines. More involved solutions can mean identifying key crossings and bringing disused bridges back into use, with suitable access, or building under-passes. Network Rail has diverted footpaths so that three paths may use one crossing. In these cases, Network Rail provides the structure, and the local authority provides on-going maintenance.

Funding: Network Rail has control periods. There will be new money for problems in 2018 but often there is more chance of getting crossing improvements funded at the end of their control period when they have to use up their budget i.e. 2017.

ROWIPS

Rights of Way Improvement Plans need to be reviewed every 10 years.

Good examples: Hampshire and Berkshire.

A guidance PDF is available.

Tourism identified as the largest sector in rural economies.

Visit England – tourism and usage data

Most foreign tourists go to London and not into the countryside. Even UK residents can be unwilling.

Can download data on users in a local area.

Users need good signposting.

Most visit places within 2 miles of where they live and need a dense network of 2.4km typical.

Example of a grassy matting surface which is good for creating routes without harming the environmental appearance.

Hindrances like unnecessary stiles and kissing gates should be reviewed.

Puddles around gates can be a problem – need better surfaces.

Various projects e.g. Walkers are Welcome, Walking for Health, volunteer led walks etc. to encourage countryside access.

ORVal – Outdoor Recreation Tool. – valuation by Exeter University – will tell you how much a new route would be worth.